The Kombéré: Death, Enthronement

631 763 202 Death. Upon the death of a kombéré two representatives in mourning are sent from the canton to Ouagadougou to deliver the sad news to the Mogho Naba. The envoys are entrusted with a horse or a sheep, depending on the importance of the naba. Tanga branches are tied to the animal's tail (see Ouidi Naba, Chapter 4).

[136] When the first emissary reaches the courtyard of the Mogho Naba, he sits down, taking care to place one hand on the ground and stretching out his arm. Since the very sight of the horse is significant, even before any explanation is offered, the Zusoaba enters the house of the Mogho Naba and comes out again bearing a gourd of water with flour in it (zom kom) which he pours on the envoy's arm.

The horse is then handed over to a representative of the Ouidi Naba who removes the branches and leads the animal to Widhin [Ouidin].

The Zusoaba takes back the gourd, and it is only then that the Ouidi Naba says to the Mogho Naba: "Naba zagl yka sambga le tongalamé (Chief So-and-So has been stricken with such-and-such an illness and has succumbed)." It should be added that before going to see the Mogho Naba, the envoys first inform the ministers of the death of the kombéré.

631 766 The Mogho Naba asks a few appropriate questions and sends the representatives to prepare the kouré. On the day of the ceremony, the Nabitienga (eldest son of the deceased chief) has large quantities of beer and saghbo prepared and sheep and cattle killed to feed the people gathered in great numbers for the occasion.

The house is circled, as was described for the Mogho Naba.

[145] (a) Koupéogo (kouré basket). The koupéogo is a basket, artistically made, into which is put the foutou (clothing of the deceased), [137] koursi (trousers), his pougla (red fez), his néoda (slippers), the zandé (club), and the wed'zouré (horse's tail). This basket is laid upon a pé'gaongo (skin of a sheep) in the zaongo (antechamber).

One of the sisters of the Nabitienga, usually the eldest daughter of the deceased, carries the péogo outside and seats herself at the place where the dead chief held his daily audiences (guéré). The benda, liumsé, and gangando drums are played together, and then

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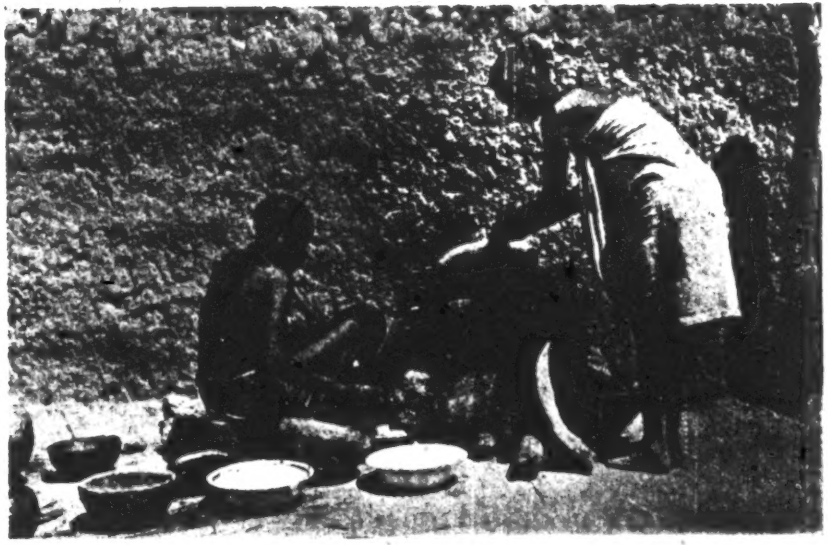

Making Saghabo.
Millet Mush, Food of the Mossi.

From the Mission of the White Fathers at Ouagadougou.

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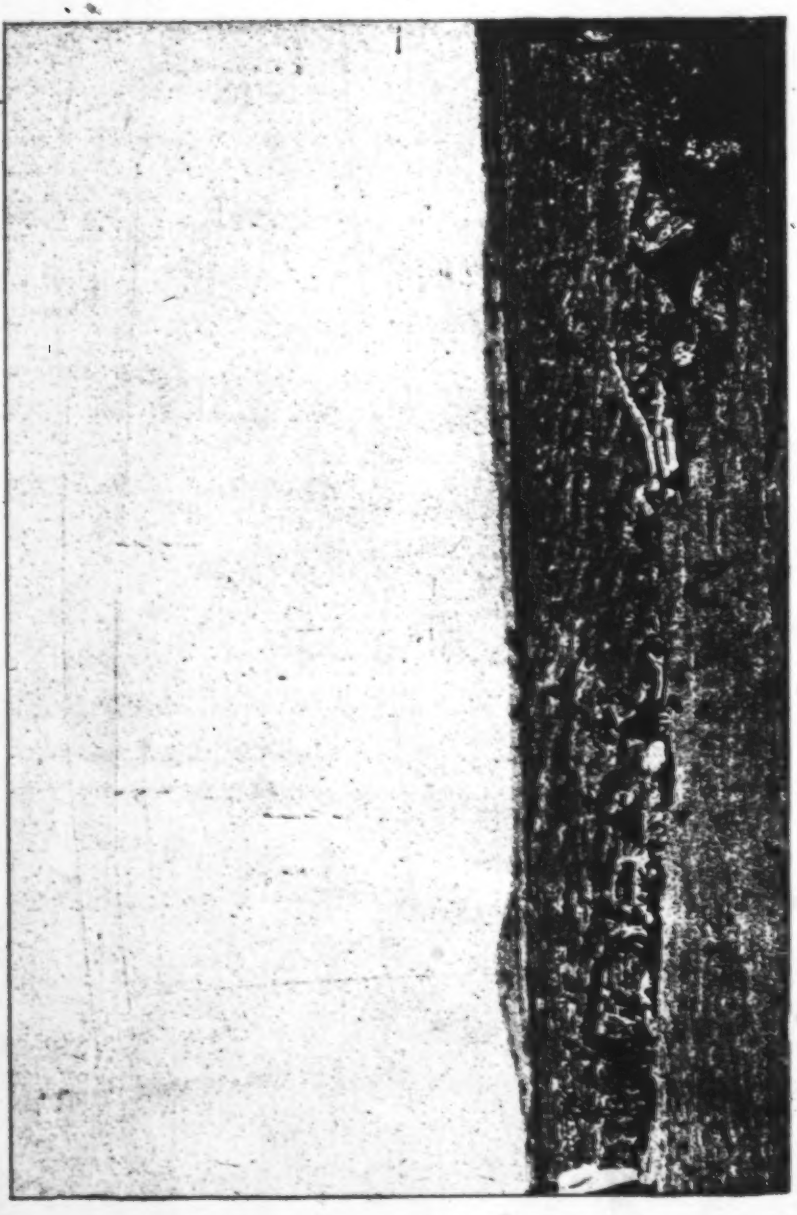

The Bush in Mossi Country.

133 are bordered with hills. Nevertheless, it may be said that Mossi country is flat. It is covered with the classic bush of the Sudan with [137] its small shrubs and tall grass interspersed with bastard mahogany, /7/ huge trunks of the baobabs, and tamarind and silk-cotton trees, thicker on the banks of the Volta rivers, thinner around the villages.

241 The country is quite fertile and easily provides for its inhabitants.
262 The various kinds of millet grow well, especially the small white variety (Pennisetum spicatum) which, mashed and boiled, is the staple of the diet and sorghum, or large red millet, which is used to prepare the famous beer of the country. The horses eat the latter kind, although they prefer the large white millet. Around the huts maize grows well in soil fertilized by the daily accumulation of waste. It is a welcome source of grain when the millet reserves of the previous year are running low and the current harvest has not yet matured. Maize fields are surrounded with a double row of sorghum and often [283] with a double row of a fiber plant called bérensé, a sort of hemp which the natives use to make ropes. After the maize has been harvested, the field is planted with previously prepared tobacco seedlings. Finally, the sunken areas created when huts are built, as well as all slightly damp places, are planted with gombo, okra, which is highly valued as a sauce ingredient.

[311] During the rainy season no piece of land remains unused around the villages, and when the red millet ripens and the ears join across the path, passage becomes difficult. Even the hut roofs bear all kinds [415] of calabash plants. These supply the housewives with gourds that fulfill the purposes served by our plates, dishes, glasses, and basins; the travellers with their flasks; the snuff-takers with their boxes; and the sorcerers with their spirit-calling instruments. The large gourds that are used to make drums grow among the shoots of maize. In the marshes near the watercourses where water lies stagnant, rice fields are planted, but rice is a luxury food, hard to cultivate because of [554] the care it requires. The natives use it only on feast days or when they wish to honor a distinguished guest. Cotton is sown in damp places among the stalks of large red millet, and it is harvested much later. Peanuts and peas also take up part of the cultivated land, while beans creep along the ground between the shoots of small millet. Peppers, sesame, the indigo plant, yams, manioc, sweet potatoes, and a small

592 A typical soukala consists of the master's hut, a hut for each wife, one hut for the sheep and goats, another for the horse if he has one, a hut for the family mill, and, finally, a receiving hut with two doors sufficiently high to permit entrance without stooping and set sometimes [351] as an entrance way and sometimes within the cluster of huts. All these dwellings stand in a circle and are joined either by a cob wall or by /11/ mat fences taller than a man and held up by stakes. The master's hut, which usually stands beside the huts for the horses and sheep, is set off from the others by mats to insure his privacy. A low wall describes an arc within the inner courtyard; this is the kitchen [273] when it is not raining. Big jars of fired clay which are used to brew ●415] millet beer rest between the huts. In front of this cluster of huts, a shelter is built, usually high enough to permit standing and consisting basically of forked stakes with branches and séko resting upon them; this shelter serves as a refuge during the hot part of the day. Small boys and unmarried girls live with their mother, while older boys, servants, and slaves each have their separate huts which face the dwellings of the master and his wives.

The term yri or soukala covers this whole complex of structures. [591] Each soukala is a distinct unit, and, some time after they marry, the children build their own residence, set completely apart from that of their parents, often in another part of the village and sometimes in [36] another village altogether. The soukala stand fifteen to twenty meters apart, and, because of this, the villages, though adequately concentrated, cover a rather extensive area. The heads of cantons 392 place an ostrich egg at the peak of the roof on their own dwellings, [237] and some even build terraced huts higher than the surrounding dwell- [55] ings. They keep their riches in these huts and a prison in the base- [67] ment. An earthen stairway leads to the terrace where the master of [512] the house receives his guests when the sun begins to sink on the horizon.

721 These people, apparently so peaceful today, were formerly quite warlike and went off to war at the slightest pretext. Foreign to the land they now occupy, the Mossi must have conquered it by force of arms. The Tarik-es-Soudan /History of Sudan/ relates that the people of Yatenga seized Timbuktu in the fourteenth century, and in 721 the fifteenth they probably carried their incursions as far as Lake 701 Bébo and even Oualata. (4) The Mossi army was greatly feared.

4. Delafosse, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 80.

323 a hollow. Straw, twigs, or pieces of bark are laid between the jars and even inside them. Then everything is covered with straw and set afire in the evening. The smaller the jar, the more heat is needed. The women fetch their goods the following morning. Some of the jars are cracked; others, insufficiently fired, would be too porous and must be fired again; the rest are gathered and sold at the market.

322 Woodworking is done by men. They use a hatchet to cut down the trees, an adze and a knife to work the lumber. The mortars and pestles used by the women to crush maize, herbs, peanuts, and sauce ingredients are made of wood, and so are the dishes shaped like gourds, the bowls for sarabo, and the tool handles. There are also stools of a rather peculiar shape. Those women who can afford them close their huts with crude wooden doors. All these industries, however, are quite primitive and of no great interest.

326 [564] 306 The iron and copper work is so distinctive that those who practice it could only be specialists. The smiths, in fact, form a separate caste. One is born a smith, but one becomes a jeweller, since this profession is open to everyone. The smiths extract the metal and make iron tools: hoes, hatchets, adzes, and knives. It is said that no layman is allowed to watch when they extract the iron from the ore, and this would explain why the natives do not know how it is done. As I was unable to visit Yàtenga, the area where most iron workers are to be found, I am not familiar with the extracting process.

326 306 [30] /59/ The jewellers occasionally work with iron, but they do so on the sly. They may repair broken tools, sharpen hatchets and arrow tips, and re-use a piece of iron, for instance, make an old hoe into nails, hinges, etc. Their main task, however, is the manufacture of all sorts of bracelets and of all the copper ornaments in a horse's harness: headstall, bit, spurs, stirrups, and the copper plates which hang from the saddle. These plates are a strange ornament which seems peculiar to the Mossi. They may reach 40 centimeters in diameter, and their edge may be as wide as 10 centimeters. The naba and the wealthy horsemen fasten them behind the stirrups, on either [415] side of the saddle, where they hang down the horse's flanks. Servants sometimes use them to drink beer when they have no other containers. To smelt the iron or copper, the Mossi use charcoal which they obtain exactly in the same manner as our /French/ colliers. The fire is kept going with a double bellows made of the skin of goats or sheep and operated by a child. The red-hot iron is hammered with a cylindrical

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Above: Cooking Sarabo.
Below: Outdoor Kitchen.

Above: Millet Granaries.
Below: Riding an Ox.

244 Some people, before they sow millet, lay out small plots of tomatoes in the fields reserved for millet, and water them morning and evening. They do this when the field is cleared just before sowing. Then they dig up the seedlings at the first rainfall and plant them elsewhere. Their tomatoes are ripe before the maize.

The three other kinds of tomatoes are cultivated in the same fashion.

The Mossi are familiar with the native eggplant. It is called boyo in Mossi, baulo in Nounouma, bio in Kassouna, boroma /482/ in Sissala. These eggplants are planted when the large red millet is sown. They are placed around the soukala, or in the bush near the watercourses. They are harvested in September at the same time as the large red millet.

The Mossi also cultivate pimentos (kiparé).

The seeds are sown near the soukala, without any preparatory work, at the beginning of the winter season. The weeds are removed after fifteen or twenty days. Two months after sowing, the young shoot produces offspring. The pimento may be gathered at that time. They are removed as the need arises and added to the sauce.

[438] The Mossi are fond of pimento. Those who grow it in large quantities sell the surplus at market.

249 As for gourds and calabashes, the Mossi have three kinds as
● 415 listed below:

1. The ordinary calabash, which is very large and which is cut in two to make household calabashes. They call it vandé.

The Mossi plant it at the beginning of the winter season, in patches of good soil near the huts, or in similar spots in the bush. Holes are made in the ground with the koutiaga, in which seeds are placed and then covered up. The calabashes only ripen at the end of six or seven months, that is to say, when the winter season is over. Then they are cut in two, and the inner part is removed. This is how the household calabashes are fashioned.

2. The drinking calabash. This one has the natural shape of a swollen gourd with a neck widening toward the top. The Mossi call it binga. It is sown by the huts and made to climb upon the roofs.

249 It is gathered when the winter season is over. The upper tip is cut
415 horizontally to create an opening, and water is poured inside to rot the fibrous inner part. When this is accomplished, the calabash is filled with pebbles and shaken until the torn fibers are removed. Once this has been done, the binga is ready to use. When they go
[482] on a trip, the Mossi carry it suspended from the shoulder as a drinking gourd, like all Blacks of West Africa. /483/ They use a cork of green leaves to prevent the water from escaping.

3. The green gourds properly so called (kamboudou in Mossi) which are made to grow on the roofs. The Mossi do not eat them any more than they eat the two previous species. They cut them in two and fashion them into small household calabashes.

249 Calabashes are not cultivated as a food crop, therefore, but as a crop ranking with karnyanga, cotton, tobacco, hemp, indigo, etc.

244 The Mossi also grow a kind of large cucumber, yorolé. The Gourounsi call it gango and the Bambara dié.

At the beginning of the winter season, yorolé are planted around the soukala where the household refuse is discarded. Yorolé are planted by the women. Weeds, when they come out, are cleared with the ouaka. The yorolé are harvested immediately
[252] after the millet and stored in the huts. They are cooked in water and eaten as they are, without seasoning or salt.

As for niri (the Mossi word) or yergan (the Nounouma word), it is a small gourd the size of an orange, green or yellowish green, that grows in the fields along the ground. The yergan are gathered when they are ripe, placed in a hole in the ground where they are left to rot, and then washed. Then the seeds are removed and used
[252] in the sauce, or else they are eaten roasted and seasoned with salt. One does not eat the yergan themselves, therefore, but only their seeds.

The Mossi grow them in the south, at Nobéré and Rakaye. The yergan are sown at the same time as millet, around the soukala, in the fields of maize and large red millet. They are gathered during the first half of October.

282 sell for 200 cowries, large ones for 400). He leaves them to soak
294 in a large canari with yogré seeds for twelve hours. Then he re-
435 moves the hair by hand, washes the skin thoroughly, and places it again in a canari with seeds of pélanaga (a tree that grows in the bush). He washes and rubs the hide with these seeds. Then he leaves it to dry in the sun after covering it with butter, real butter rather than karité butter. The skin may then be used to make various items.

Kinoga also buys cowhide at market to make sandals. One cowhide is worth 3,000 cowries. He puts it in a large canari where he leaves it soaking for three days, then he takes it out, removes the hair with a knife, and strikes the skin with a small stick to soften it. Whatever amount of leather is needed to make sandals is then removed from the hide, which is used up gradually as the need arises.

The shoemaker's tools are made by the blacksmith. These tools are worth 100 cowries apiece, except for the awl that is worth 20 and the wooden knife that is made by the shoemaker himself and worth 50. All of the shoemaker's tools taken together are thus worth 470 cowries, or only 50 centimes.

Our shoemaker makes the following items:

1. Sandals, first and foremost. The most expensive ones are worth 2,500 cowries a pair, the less expensive ones 1,500 cowries.

2. Leather grigris, bracelets, pouches, etc. The pouches are worth 100 cowries, the bracelets 50. He only makes them on order. It must be said that other shoemakers stock them up beforehand and have them taken to market.

Of course, what the shoemaker prepares is the physical part of the grigri, its outer covering. It is not he who gives the grigri its power, its soul.

3. Kinoga does not make satchels, goatskin bags, but other shoemakers do.

[415] /531/ There are goatskins used to store millet. Large ones are worth 1 franc and small ones 0.50 franc. Then, there are goatskins used to hold water. They are worth from 0.30 to 1 franc. Finally, there are small goatskins used as purses or coin bags and worth 0.20 franc.

[372] 4. Shoemakers also make leather cases for strike-a-light steel
[326] (200 cowries) and for needles (50 cowries). Both strike-a-light steel and needles are made by blacksmiths.

422 Household utensils. —The large earthen slabs set up to crush the
415 grain belong to the compound, but the rectangular granitic stones set into the slabs are owned by individual women, as are the movable pestles used to pound grain on the stones.

422 The wooden mortars and pestles, which are very useful and, be-
412 sides, are heavy, cumbersome, and difficult to destroy, belong to the
592 compound and sometimes to the head of the work group, in other
571 words, to the group itself. In fact, the head of the work group provides part of these implements when the ones purchased by the zakasoba are insufficient.

422 As for the canari, the largest, which are like small vats and may
415 be as high as one or one and a half meters, are used to hold the dolo
592 /270/ made by the women. They belong to the compound, and they are bought by the compound head. The ordinary canari (25 to 30 centimeters high and used to fetch water or to cook) belong privately to each woman of the compound. The same applies to gourds. The women often buy their canari or gourds with their husband's cowries, but the object, once bought, belongs to them.

422 Clothing. —Clothes are owned fully on a private basis, no matter what their origin. Thus, the skirt cloth bought by the husband for his wife belongs to her.

Ornaments and jewelry. —These are also owned privately, no matter what their origin. Hence, they belong to each man, each woman, each child.

Weapons. —They are likewise owned privately.

Amulets, charms. —The case is the same as for weapons. If, however, we use the word "charm" in its broadest sense, as any object pertaining to the cult, there are family charms which are owned by the family.

Cowries, metal coins, etc. —These are likewise private property.

421 In short, property belonging to the total family is practically nonexistent among the Mossi of Yatenga. There is subfamilial (compound) property and the property of that economic section of the subfamily which is called a work group. In addition to this communal property, there are household property and strictly private property.